

UNITED STATES ARMY CHAPLAIN SCHOOL
FORT HAMILTON, NEW YORK

THE CENTURIONS

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30 APRIL 1973

INTRODUCTION

Personal appraisal of the chaplaincy convinces me that one weakness of this ministry is the lack of Christian community and congregational life. The religious needs of military people for congregational life are subtended to the personalized counseling services of the Chaplain. Through this proposed congregational model, I hope to present one way to draw people into a Protestant Christian community called "The Centurions." The tremendous demand for personal counseling makes it imperative that a community be formed to provide opportunities for group work and preventive counseling work.

Since many committed military Christians attend church off-post, the on-post congregational fellowship misses the strength of their commitment and religious knowledge. Therefore, a particular effort is made to include those who participate off-post.

Some success in drawing together a non-denominational fellowship surfaces in the experiences of the Campus Crusade and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Their success indicates that the Centurions would work.

This paper is limited to an organization for personnel and dependents of a Brigade sized training unit. It does not involve the trainees. It touches only briefly upon the relationship of the Centurions to the post Protestant program.

IS THERE A NEED?

"Personal isolation is becoming a major social fact of our time. A great many people are disturbed by the feeling that they are rootless or increasingly anonymous, that they are living in a continually changing environment where there is little sense of community,"¹ says Vance Packard. This lack of community in military society is evident in social problems, in the military structure, and in the chapel.

Social problems currently vexing our posts are in part a reaction to the anonymous nature of our fast changing population. Racial tension flares because men and women do not draw together in the warmth of an accepting community. Instead, we have growing apartheid resulting from cliques that reject one another. Drugs and alcohol are escape mechanisms often used by persons who feel lonely. In fact, some abuse is an attempt to be accepted by a group. Dr. Howard Clinebell states, "The use of drugs frequently is a sign of belonging to that culture."²

¹Vance Packard, A Nation of Strangers, (New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1972), p. ix.

²Howard J. Clinebell, Jr., "Understanding and Counseling the Drug Dependent Person," Military Chaplains' Review, I, No. 3 (August, 1972), p. 8.

An increasing number of older soldiers are becoming discontent in their jobs. A report in the New York Times says,

A general feeling of obsolescence appears to overtake the middle managers. Their careers appear to have reached a plateau. Characteristically, middle managers perceive that they lack influence on organizational decision making, yet they must implement company policy.³

Sociologists recognize that the decrease of primary relationships contributes to deviations in our society. Urbanization increases the number of secondary relationships and decreases our dependence and contact with our primary groups. Many community values which were met by the extended family and small community are no longer available. Without the extended family and other primary groups, many have no one to turn to during periods of crisis. Since mobility and bureaucracy generally decrease primary relationships, many soldiers have a lack of primary relationship.

Current social problems do not afflict the majority, yet the problems reoccur often enough to know that some needs are not being met. Without ignoring the backbone of strength already present in the chapel congregation, we must deal with those troubled by the current social unrest.

Through various military organizational structures, a need for an enhanced community becomes evident. The most striking examples seem to be Army Community Services and the increased use of advisory councils.

³Howard Munson, "The Ranks of the Discontent," New York Times, December 31, 1972, IV, p. 10.

The Army Community Service Program is intended to provide Army personnel with certain social welfare services which would normally be available to them as civilian members of a community. The extent of the programs and activities for such services at military installations is dependent upon the resources available and the needs and number of families within the commander's area of responsibility.⁴

When complaints about certain aspects of bureaucracy increased, various advisory councils were formed to help the chain of command respond to community needs. Although a proliferation of councils does not automatically enhance community, the councils were successful in many cases. Enlisted Men Councils, Junior Officer Councils, NCO Councils, Commissary Councils, and Post Exchange Councils are some examples of ways in which the military structure is trying to respond to felt needs.

Some important signs that community is necessary to religious life lie in the religious developments of today. Religious involvement has been decreasing. Even traditional religious manifestations point toward the need for better community. My personal belief is that the strength of civilian churches lies in their community life. The strength of the Jesus people, the charismatic movement, and the popular non-Christian religions usually focuses upon building a community of believers. These signs indicate the need for community in the chapel.

⁴"The Chaplain Assists the Military Family," (Fort Hamilton, New York: U.S. Army Chaplain School, 1972), p. 11.

THE VALUE OF THE CENTURIONS

The Centurions will be a religious social group that provides impetus in developing primary social groups, a community of believers, and the faith. Packard wrote,

Loneliness also clearly accounts for much of the sharp upsurge in entrepreneurs offering people "Group encounters." According to one estimate, six million Americans have flocked to at least one such session. . . . The noted psychologist Carl Rogers, who studied group groping in southern California, concluded that the people⁵ there were almost all transients in search of roots.

There is no need for fly-by-night groups when we can provide a viable important group within our Chapel congregation. Many of the values that people are searching for can be found within the church. By recognizing this search for community we will be providing for the "fellowship of the saints." Through the Centurions we can meet both the traditional and the current needs of the community of believers.

The traditional religious needs of the community are met through worship, sunday schools, and choirs. The Centurions can provide the chapel structure that can add training in stewardship, evangelism, social welfare, fellowship, and many other traditional Christian activities.

⁵Packard, p. 177

The current religious problems that can be met through community are: helping the lonely, combating addiction, and organizing for small group experiences within the community. The groups can be used to help people with their problems, and with their Christian growth.⁶

Packard observes, "Each of Toronto's ethnic groups has a host of organizations but four that are common to almost all are community halls, ethnic newspapers, credit unions, and churches."⁷ The church is not dying; it has atrophied from lack of use. By revitalizing the chapel, we can enhance the community. Actually, we would be calling the chapel back to its purpose.

A brief look at what a congregation really is. When God's Holy Spirit brings people to faith, He intends that such people be "The Church" in every sense of that significant word. Those whom He calls into faith, He enlightens, and He qualifies for service. They are people who are saved to serve. God carries on His great program of winning and keeping people through people. . . . To belong to the church, to have a share in the responsibility of its work, is not optional for Christians; it is an inseparable part of his calling and new life. And he is to fulfill his calling in his own personal life and within the framework of the local congregation, just as "They continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship and in breaking of bread and in prayers." (Acts 2:42)⁸

⁶Howard J. Clinebell, Jr., Lecture notes on 23 March 1973 at U.S. Army Chaplain School.

⁷Packard, p. 107.

⁸Guido A. Merkins, "Motivating the Congregation for its Evangelical Task," (St. Louis: Convocation address delivered at Concordia Seminary, 1959), p. 1.

THE CENTURIONS ORGANIZE

Basic to any organization is knowing who and where the people are. An effective method of religious census and record keeping is necessary. Through coordination with the Adjutant, all incoming and outgoing personnel are routed through the Chapel.

Incoming personnel will complete a Census card and receive a personal visitation within ten days after arrival in the Brigade. During this personal visitation, the on-post and the off-post religious programs are explained. The invitation is given to make religion a part of their life, and participation in the Centurions is urged for Protestant personnel. The visitor will explain the objectives of the Centurions, which are:

- To provide a Christian community within the Brigade.
- To provide for fellowship.
- To provide therapy groups, as needed.
- To provide growth groups, as needed.
- To provide adult education.
- To provide cross-fertilization of ideas between on-post and off-post church attenders.

The organization of those who participate in the Centurions is similar to the organization of traditional congregational life. I would recommend an executive council composed of the leaders of various committees. The group would elect officers. Committee members would be recruited from the Centurions by the Chaplains, the officers, and other committee members. The needs of the fellowship should be regularly evaluated. Then committees are formed to deal with these concepts. Some of the committees that might develop are: evangelism, religious education, stewardship, young adults, families, fellowship, and worship.

The evangelism committee seeks to stimulate and lead all members to continuous and concerted efforts to awaken those who are indifferent to spiritual concerns. It shall study continually the manner in which the chapel reaches out to include others in the Christian community.

The religious education committee will keep the Centurions informed of educational opportunities on and off post. It will work to help provide volunteers to participate in the Sunday School. The scheduling and developing of therapy and growth groups will be accomplished in coordination with the young adult and family committees.

The stewardship committee will be involved in planning to enlist the time, talent, and treasures of the Centurions for mission. Recognizing the untapped talents and financial

resources of the congregation, it will attempt to present for support challenging mission opportunities. The committee will help to maintain the altar, and to beautify the chapel grounds. Explaining the use of the chaplain fund, the needs of the chapel, and the post wide chapel financial needs will be a part of their responsibility.

Concerns of the young single soldier in the Brigade are varied. The young adult committee will help to develop attractive activities for religious and social growth. In coordination with the religious education committee, therapy and growth groups for young adults are planned. Recognizing the loneliness of the young soldier, they will attempt to draw the young person into fellowship with the families. Getting families to open their homes to these young persons would be a part of their responsibility.

The family committee will be aware of the many opportunities in normal family living that call for therapy and growth groups. Planning programs with the cooperation of the religious education committee, they will seek to minister to the families of the brigade.

The fellowship committee shall plan activities that help to draw the Centurions together into Christian community. Activities for all age groups can provide the social fellowship that builds primary relationships. This committee will coordinate social welfare efforts.

Helping to improve the worship life of the chapel is the function of the worship committee. It will try to make the worship more meaningful to the congregation, involve lay participation, and explain and incorporate new forms of worship. The goal is to make the worship of the chapel an important part of the community.

The Centurions will meet monthly for a social activity, where the other activities of the group will be discussed. The gathering will draw together on-post and off-post worshippers. Each meeting will feature some growth opportunity, but the emphasis will be on social fellowship.

The committees and smaller groups will meet as often as desired. All small groups will be contracted for a period of time. The contract can be renegotiated if the group desires to continue.

Membership in the Centurions will be open to all who wish to join. Requiring membership helps get a commitment to serve within the fellowship. A membership card will be issued and an address list maintained by the chaplain's office. Each member's denominational and congregational membership is not affected by Centurion membership; each continues to belong to his own church.

The Brigade Protestant Chaplain serves as an advisor to the Centurions and to all committees. He provides administrative services for record keeping, membership lists, and

mailings; schedules of times and places for meetings; and coordination with the Post Chaplain and the Brigade Commander. He maintains liason with civilian pastors in the community and invites them to participate in the Centurions.

While the Centurions is a brigade religious organization, the Centurions does not give special regard to time in grade or service. The link with the command structure lies through the Chaplain. If he desires to participate, the commander functions as another member of the Centurions. He may serve in whatever way the group desires.

The Centurions also function in such a way as to be of help to the total post Protestant program. It continually coordinates with other chapel activities and with referral agencies on post. One particular place where close coordination is necessary is with the Army Community Services.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the Centurions seems to be another organization in an overorganized world. That it may well be. However, the military chapel has been underorganized. When the Government pays for the preacher and the building, much of the impetus for congregational organization is gone. The community is minimized because many demands upon Protestants for commitment are gone. Surely, we do not need money raising to be the motivating force behind our chapels.

Rather than sitting back and enjoying the benefits of financial support, the chapel congregation could be deeply involved in building a community. The chapel offers a unique opportunity to develop a ministry where the resources flow toward mission and people. The Centurions is my suggestion to help develop this flow into a mighty river of committed Christians.



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30 April 1973

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